Fog Hour

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Fog Hour

by Zephyrlite

Summary

Living in an abandoned world with an ocean of deadly fog, Tango spends his time scavenging the old cities for anything of use.

catalyst - noun
: a substance that changes the rate of a chemical reaction but is itself unchanged at the end of the process

Notes

Hello! There is a possibility I will be turning this into a series, so definitely be on the lookout for that if you're interested. Enjoy!

TW: non-graphic injury, themes of being left behind, themes of light claustrophobia, and unnamed non-graphic character death.

See the end of the work for more notes

Tango huffed as he slung the last wet shirt over the clothesline. He felt sopping wet now. Might as well sling himself over the clothesline too.

The last shirt was Impulse's, one of his many gray ones, and it took quite an effort to scrub the mud off. *So fun, thanks.* The man gets to dirty anything he pleases under the pretense that "oh, it's not my fault I get muddy while I work because I'm impulse and I'm strong and buff and get to wiggle my way out of chores just because I'm the most capable at lugging sheets of metal around."

And what does Tango get?

Tango gets laundry duty, and errand runs, and pretty much every other chore because Bdubs is too busy gardening. *Yeah yeah yeah,* they needed food to eat. Whatever. He could do laundry. At least he got the opportunity to bike down into the lower city in his free time.

Going down in elevation to the lower city meant he could scavenge, and scavenging meant rummaging around like a kleptomaniac magpie until he found something interesting enough to tinker with and scurrying away with it like a gleeful goblin.

He was currently working on fixing their radio, an experiment he couldn't wait to see whether it worked. Who cares if the world has largely ended? There was probably some weirdo out there still managing at least one station, though if it were him, he'd have his favorite songs on loop.

That was probably why he never got the opportunity to manage one.

The only other thing on his grocery list for today was to find batteries, but that was just an order from Bdubs because the string lights strung over their campgrounds died.

Tango scrubbed his hands against his shirt to dry them—not that his shirt was any dryer—and turned to head back to his bike. From where he was at the river, it would take him a good while to wheel down to the ground city, but he didn't mind. Riding his bike was nice. It eased his mind.

It was certainly better than doing *laundry*.

Tango walked away from the creek and found his bike resting against a tree. He hefted his backpack onto his shoulders and climbed on, kicking at the dirt to get it moving.

The breeze felt nice. The ride was muscle memory at this point. Tango hummed idly as he biked down the narrow dirt paths, overgrown with grass and weeds and little yellow flowers. Looking to the side and seeing a sheer drop used to scare him, but after months of descending this trial, he finds it normal.

From here you could see the endless ocean of fog. You almost forget that it's deadly.

He bikes through the first level of the city, not caring to stop because, well, it's already been raided a hundred times over. Impulse often comes here to tear off and drag away some metal

sheets for their campsite wall, so the small buildings are slowly being disassembled as well.

He continues biking, slowly lowering in altitude as he moves lower into the city.

Not for the first time, Tango wonders what this city's name was. Bdubs proposed that they name it themselves, but it never felt right to Tango. It already did have a name, and it deserved to be remembered, even if the city had long been evacuated. The only sign that might have told them was faded beyond recognition when they first arrived though, so it was forever anonymous now, whether it wished to be or not.

Tango eventually reached ground level and hopped off his bike, resting it against the metal wall of one of the buildings.

He took off his bag and fished for something inside it, pulling out the small clock-like device and checking it. He had about an hour before The Tide rose. It should be plenty of time to rummage around a bit before he had to go back.

And so, he commenced the rummagification.

He knew he'd already searched through the first section of buildings to his right, so he walked a little further and entered a shop-like building on the left. This, like most places, was old and rotting from weather and time, but a lot of things still held a lot of usefulness to the right beholder, it just took a little improvising.

This shop seemed to be a yarn shop. Or used to be. It seemed like most things were taken during the evacuation, but Tango still found a rotting box of old materials and debated whether it was worth taking up space in his bag. They could always use string… and needles for that matter.

Tango found a few decent balls of orange string and placed them in his backpack along with a needle kit.

He needed to remember to also look for batteries. Batteries, batteries for Bdubs. Yes, he could remember that.

Tango slung his bag back onto his shoulder and moved on.

There wasn't anything useful under the shop's bathroom sink, nor was there anything they didn't already have in the small storage room. There were mostly empty cardboard boxes, but they were in terrible shape from weather corrosion.

He ended up back out on the street and moving to the next building, which was entirely empty, and then the next, which was filled with a bizarre amount of junk. *Bingo*.

It was a pawn shop by the looks of it. There was random stuff everywhere, and Tango's eyes lit up like an electrocuted firefly. He dropped his bag to the ground and dashed to one end of the little room, getting down on his knees to pull boxes and things off the shelves.

This stuff. He could work with some of this stuff. Don't get him wrong, some of it was absolutely useless—who thought of these creepy tiny glass babies anyway?—but other stuff

made all the right gears in his head spin.

He threw open another box and some high-pitched noise of excitement escaped him.

A toaster. He found a toaster. He was definitely taking the toaster.

Tango was in the process of attempting to shove it into his backpack when he remembered something and internally facepalmed. He still needed to look for batteries. The zipper *mostly* closed… eh, it would be fine. He stood back up and crossed the room to look through smaller boxes.

There was a lot of old, cheapy-looking jewelry, and his hands paused over a pair of earrings with interesting wiring. They could be used for his radio.

In the bag they go.

He dug around a bit more through other boxes and containers and sighed. Really? A whole shop of random junk and no batteries? He probably wasn't looking hard enough.

A few boxes later, he gave up searching in favor of covering more ground.

Tango trudged along the narrow city path and poked around different piles of scrap metal and junk, throwing anything interesting in his bag alongside the toaster but still not finding any batteries. He just about decided to turn back when something sounded around the corner of one of the buildings, and Tango froze.

There… shouldn't be anything alive here. Certainly not animals. The fog killed them, so… what?

His heart rate picked up at the thought of another person. He… wouldn't let them have his toaster. He would die fighting for it if he had to.

"Uh—who's there?" Tango called out tentatively. The shuffling from around the corner abruptly stopped.

Silence.

Tango straightened himself. "You can't take my toaster, I'll wackificate you! But, uh—if you're not here for that then I promise I'm harmless. A friendly guy, really! We can be buddies! Please… also be friendly?"

"…why would I want your toaster?"

Tango blinked. "You don't. You definitely don't." He moved towards the direction of the voice and peered around the corner of a building, into a small alleyway littered with boxes and trash bags. There was… a man there, sitting beside the pile of trash. He had a green army coat on and a fluff of white hair on his head. They made eye contact when Tango came into view.

"I thought this place was abandoned." The man said.

Tango shook his head. “Nope! Me and uh—“ *Me and my two friends live higher up the cliffside. You can find our camp and raid it. Nope. Definitely not telling him that*. “Me and my toaster. Looking for batteries. Yep.”

“Huh.”

Tango paused. “…are you ok?”

“Yep.”

“Just like, chilling there, or what?”

“Mhm.”

“Cooool,” Tango said, taking a step back. What a weird guy. “Well, gotta go, on a time crunch after all—“ He froze. *Shoot. Shoot, shoot, shoot!* He briskly whipped an arm back to pull out the watch, because why did he forget to check—

Oh. That was… not good.

Tango stared at the watch, and the man stared at Tango, and Tango made a drawn-out, high-pitched note of concern. The batteries could wait. He was not emotionally prepared to be suffocated by evil air today.

“Well this has been fun, but I think I’ll be leaving now,” Tango said, lifting the scarf around his neck over his nose. “The Tide’s about to rise. Nice meeting you!”

Flee with extra flee! He turned to make his quick exit.

“…Wait.”

Tango paused and swiveled his head back around. The man was silent for a long moment, *each precious second down the drain*, before reluctantly gesturing to his leg. “I fell off the roof.”

A pause.

“You what the what now?”

“I fell off the roof.” The man repeated.

Oh.

Oh.

“Bruh,” Tango said, quite so eloquently.

He groaned, because curse his good conscience, and dropped his bag to the ground. He dashed back over to the man and stuck out his hand. “C'mon.”

“What?”

“I said *come on*.” Tango repeated with a hiss. Did people just not know how to hear things during time crunches?

The man frowned. “Where are we going?”

“The heck do I know! Somewhere that isn’t open air. Grab my hand dude.”

The man begrudgingly took Tango's hand and Tango pulled him upwards, bracing him as he winced and wobbled.

“I’m not even gonna ask why you were on the stupid roof.” Tango huffed, ambling their way back to the pawn shop.

He opened the door and led the man inside, and let the man sit down while he ran to a corner of the room.

“What are you doing?” The man asked.

“Sandbags.”

They were heavy, but he wouldn’t admit that. He could almost hear Impulse in his head saying *“Here, let me do it.”* Stupid “muscles of the group.” Tango was strong! He was proving Impulse wrong right now! Impulse was just… not here to see it. Which sucked, but whatever.

He piled the sandbags in front of the door, blocking the space underneath it where the fog could enter. The windows, after giving them a search down, seemed questionable at best but none were outwardly broken so it was going to have to make do. He made sure to push on them anyway, double-checking the locks to make sure they were secure.

The man was watching him from the yellow chair where he sat. Tango didn’t like feeling watched, though he assumed it was fair since the man didn’t really have anything else to look at.

“Ok,” Tango huffed, removing his hands from the last window. “I think that’s the best it’s gonna be.”

The man just stared at him, an unreadable look on his face.

“What,” Tango asked.

The man blinked. “Uhh… how does that tracker thing work?”

“What tracker thi— oh, my clock?” Tango reached into his back pocket and pulled out the round, golden pocket watch. It reflected his own face back at him, and the hands underneath the glass ticked ominously.

“I have a gift for you too,” Impulse said, holding a bundle of something wrapped in fabric.

“Oh, boy!” Bdubs said, grinning. “Two gifts? I should declare every day my birthday!”

Tango laughed beside him. Bdubs took the bundle held out by Impulse and unwrapped it eagerly, something shiny catching as the light touched it.

"It's a clock that tracks the Fog tides times. That way it's easier to check how far away it is. I was thinking we can take it with us whenever someone goes down to the lower city, or anywhere the fog reaches." Impulse explained. He watched Bdubs's face as he talked, and smiled when Bdub's face lit up.

"Oh, it's beautiful!" Bdubs grinned, holding it up to catch the full light. "That's it, you've earned my loyalty forever. Time King, that's what I'm called," he joked.

"Oh wow, so humble, all hail the Time King I guess," Tango said with a laugh, elbowing Bdubs in the ribs. Bdubs yelped and shoved Tango's arm away, and Impulse chuckled.

Tango looked up from the clock, shrugging. "Just found it," he lied.

"Nice." The man said.

Tango crossed the room and opened the closet door, peeking inside and then, when finding what he was looking for, began to pull out the boxes into the main room.

"What are you doing now," the man asked again, and Tango figured the man must have selective blindness. Tango didn't immediately respond, instead kicking the last box out of the way and moving back to the man to help him up.

"If we hide in the storage closet there's a smaller chance of deathification," he explained. The man stared, and Tango raised an eyebrow. "I mean, if you're cooler out here then suit yourself I guess, every man for himself."

Blinking, the man took Tango's hand, so Tango hoisted him up and assisted him over to the closet door. He could hear the man grunt quietly and wondered if they could find any pain meds around. It was a lesser item on his priority list however, because pain sucked but kicking the bucket sucked even more, so he was going to have to choose the lesser evil.

After what felt like literally an eternity, (he understood the man had a broken leg but *really*, couldn't he save the slowness for when they *weren't* in mortal peril?) Tango ushered the man and himself into the storage closet and shut the door behind them. It smelled dusty and a little bit like leaf rot. Tango wrinkled his nose, but again, he could choose the lesser evil.

The man was sitting on the floor opposite them now. There was a decent amount of legroom between them, as it was a larger space meant for storing boxes of extra goods, but the inky darkness of it made it seem so much more small and claustrophobic than it had to be.

"There's not a light switch?" The man asked as if reading Tango's mind, and Tango shook his head. Oh. He couldn't see. Right.

"No, and this would be a really inconvenient time for you to say you're afraid of the dark," Tango joked. The man laughed.

"Nah, nah," he said. "I'm not."

Tango laughed too. “Good, ‘cause I am.”

“Oh for real?”

Tango shrugged. “Yeah. I mean, not extremely so. It just spooks me out a little bit. Wasn’t always the case—I used to love it, but you know. Things change at the end of the world.”

The man hummed. “I get that, yeah. You start falling off roofs too.”

Tango snorted. “I think that’s just you.”

“Really? I dunno, I think it’s universal.”

Tango didn’t need to see the man’s face to hear the amused sarcasm in his voice. Tango grinned, shifting his weight on the floor and feeling the underlying threads of his anxiety loosen a little. Then the reminder of the situation rang in the back of his head and his smile fell slightly. “I wish there were more sandbags to block this door too,” he said, a bit nervously.

The man huffed. “I mean, we do actually need to breathe though. Suffocating in a closet doesn’t sound all that fun, in my opinion.”

Tango sighed and rested the back of his head against the wall. It was a fair point, but it still didn’t ease his mind. He knew full well what the fog could do.

(He’d seen it, and oh stars he wished he hadn’t. Not because it was particularly gruesome, if anything it was the opposite, a death so discreet and silent that you didn’t know it was coming until you dropped to your knees. No, the image that burned itself into his mind was the face of their fourth tag-along, a man they’d known for only four days. Strong hands pulled Tango away before he could meet the same fate.)

(*“Tango stop, it’ll kill you!” Impulse yelled in his ear, grappling with him as Tango wrestled to free himself from his friend’s grip. There was still time. He could save him—*)

(*“Let me go!” Tango shouted, because he couldn’t just let the man* die*, but Impulse pulled him into the house and slammed the door shut.*)

(They all could have died that day. The darkness of that night concealed the fog and they hadn’t seen it until it was too late. Bdubs told him a thousand times over, “*It’s not your fault. It never was. You couldn’t have known.*”)

It took Tango a moment to realize he never responded to the man, but it was far too late now, so he bit his tongue.

“My name is Etho,” the man said, as if just remembering this now. Tango blinked. “Oh—“ he paused, and then gave a short laugh. “Well, my name’s Tango, of the Tek variety.” He gave a two-fingered salute he knew neither of them saw. Etho gave a small huff of amusement.

Something in his pocket beeped, and Tango felt his heart drop. “The Tide,” he said, feeling for his clock and pulling it out. He couldn’t see it in this light (or lack thereof) but he could

see it in his mind, the little hand pointing towards his doom.

“Oh,” Etho murmured, “is that your clock?”

“Yeah,” Tango shifted, feeling the familiar nerves in his stomach. It was something he was never entirely able to shake. He saw it in his friends too, in Impulse’s shoulders and Bdubs’s hands, permanently outlined with a thin line of worry, framing them in a silhouette a smile couldn’t entirely dissuade. It was exhausting to wait like sitting ducks, wondering if this next breath was the one that would kill you.

This closet, despite the legroom, suddenly felt all too claustrophobic.

“What were you even doing out here, anyway?” Tango asked, reorienting his mind away from the terrifying thought of never leaving this room alive.

Etho hummed. “I suppose there’s not any point for me to lie, huh.”

Tango was quiet, waiting for him to continue.

“Me and a friend, we came to look for things worth selling. I went up onto the roof because I wanted to scout out the area, and… yeah. You?”

Tango’s brain paused abruptly, and he narrowed his eyes. “Sell?” he asked. “You’re not going to get very far if that’s your goal. Raiders are so few and far between and… well I’d be shocked if you ever found someone who deemed the old world currency valuable anyway. I mean, you could probably trade what you find but—“

“What?” Etho interjected, sounding confused.

Tango frowned. “What do you mean, ‘what?’”

“Are you—?” The man in front of him fell silent. Tango opened his mouth but then closed it, not sure where the conversation fell short.

“Do you just live here?” Etho finished, something odd in his voice.

Tango snorted. “No, I live above tide level obviously, I’m not stupid.”

“No, I mean in the Outerlands.”

And then it clicked.

It was such an odd question because to Tango, living in this long-ended world was the accepted truth of his reality. Of course he knew there was an alternative, that people really did live in civilization somewhere, but the thought was so disconnected from his daily life that it just… didn’t seem worth thinking about. It felt just about the same as an old story told around a fire. A nice thought, and probably the reality for someone, but it wasn’t one for him, so did it really matter?

“Is that what they’re calling it now?” He wondered aloud, and once again he was reminded of this town with an unknown name. Perhaps it was known, to someone somewhere. He picked at the hem of his sleeve. “I have a campsite with a few others. It’s a newer one so we’ve only been there for almost a year or so. We had to evacuate our old one.“

(“*Tango stop, it’ll kill you!*”)

He tugged the loose thread off of his sleeve and dropped his hand. “So. You an exile or something? They kick you out?”

“Are you?” Etho countered.

“Nah.” A quiet shrug in the dark. “We missed the ships.”

(He didn’t even know, no one told him.)

(He’d been on his own for so long. He didn’t expect the next town he’d arrived in to be empty.)

(He saw the ships leave, though. Great propellers sailed them farther into the fog until they were gone completely, carrying thousands of people from each town away to a land with a massive, metal barrier on all sides. He learned this later, on a newspaper in the first house he broke into, when his hunger outweighed everything else.)

(Meeting Impulse and Bdubs for the first time made him nearly sob in lonely relief.)

“No, I’m not an exile.“ Etho said after a moment, and Tango heard his jacket brush quietly against the wall. “Me and my friend stole a maintenance ship to get here.”

Tango almost felt his heart rate freeze.

“*What?*” Tango hissed, sitting up on his knees immediately. “Do you have it?”

Etho was silent for a moment before giving a short, confused, “Yes?”

Tango surged forward, spiking with a new urgency as he grabbed Etho’s shoulders blindly. “Take me with you,” He said desperately, and he felt Etho jump at the contact. “To where, the Mainland?” The man asked.

“Please,” Tango urged. “Me and my friends—they’re the only family I have—Take us with you. I mean I don’t have much but—“ Tango shook his head. “We’ll give you anything. I know they’d agree with me. You have to take us with you.”

He let go of Etho’s shoulders, and a wave of anxiety rolled through him.

What were the *chances?* Ships rarely to never came to the Outerlands, and it was impossible to catch them. They were here and gone, as ships in the night were, and what would Tango do anyway? Sneak on board? Maybe he could on his own by some stroke of impossible luck, but he’d rather sever his own limb than leave the others behind.

(They'd done too much for him. He'd be cutting off the only real family he'd ever known.)

It felt like forever before Etho responded, a quiet so loud it felt almost as oppressive as the dark

Finally, with a gentle laugh, he spoke.

"Honestly, I don't think I'd make it back to the ship otherwise." He hummed. "So yeah, sure. It's a deal."

Tango breathed, and then laughed, and sagged back against the wall.

There was a shuffling sound in front of him, and he heard Etho make a puzzled sound. "I don't suppose you have a flashlight?" Etho asked before Tango could speak again.

"No, why?" Tango answered, trying not to make it sound as choked up as he felt.

"I found batteries, they could probably make it work," Etho said and made a noncommittal sound. "Eh, oh well."

Tango smiled, wrapping an arm around himself as he swallowed down the frog in his throat.

They were going to be ok.

End Notes

Kudos and comments make me super happy :DD

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!